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## Harris, Tina 2013 *Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions*, reviewed by Jen Jack Giesecking

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Tina Harris, *Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions*<sup>[1]</sup>, University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA, 2013, 184 pages, \$ 24.95, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8203-4512-3.

*Geographical Diversions* is a well written ethnographic contribution to the study of mobilities, fixities, and trade, with a focus on trade routes in Nepal, Tibet (or Tibetan Autonomous Region, i.e. TAR), India, and China. In her first monograph, anthropologist and geographer Tina Harris traces the “properties, spatial origins, and trajectories of commodities” that serve to fix some geographies while rendering others mobile and free. Moving between ethnographic thick descriptions of traders’ precarious stop and start movements over dangerous and shifting routes, dull-yet-revitalized British colonial diaries, local and international newspaper clippings and archival records, and interviews with traders, the book is a dialogue between geocultural and geopolitical economies of those living and trading across national, regional, and local scales. Unable to reproduce Owen Lattimore’s mandate to “follow the thing” due to wildly shifting border policies, legalities, and regulations, Harris wisely devotes her attention to traders’ experiences with commodities. Ranging from dvd players to tsampa, and from toilet paper to cement, commodities enable Harris to grasp the ways in which traders manage the meaning of their goods “acting as crucial nodes in the paths of things” (page 54).

The core of Harris’ book and its most useful theoretical contribution is encapsulated in the title: *geographical diversions* are those practices that “fix” certain places against the mobility of others, as well as fix people against others’ mobility. Harris’ dialectic between mobility and fixity makes reference to the dialectic between processes of *time-space compression* (Harvey, 1989) and *time-space expansion* (Katz, 2004)— a truly long time coming and needed dialectic in our field. The phrase

“time-space expansion” invokes the corresponding sprawl of capitalist inequalities that appear along with the all-access world afforded by the privileged, as revealed by “space-time compression.” By bringing contradictions into conversation, Harris consistently shows how the “inherent unevenness and contradictions of geographical development” shifts over generations through the mundane objects that pass through the routes, storehouses, and accounting sheets of traders (page 128). In so doing this project also does well to extend and broaden David Harvey’s concept of the “spatial fix”.

The first chapter opens with Harris seeking the mental maps of traders of their routes, none of which they feel able to draft because “a trade route is never simply ‘there’, displaying a simple, recognizable shape over the course of centuries; groups of people may follow the same paths, but there is always more than one route or conception of the route being forged at a time” (page 31). A general historical and political introduction grounds the reader in the landscape, with particular attention to the mid-19th and -20th centuries and recent times. For those less savvy on the region and its political history, the book’s greatest weakness are the limited number of maps and the brief descriptions of key historic moments and sites in the region’s political, economic, and social history.

In the second chapter, “From Loom to Machine”, Harris shows how the claim to the handmade, pure quality and “Tibetan-ness” of a product—the seemingly mundane *pang gdan* woolen apron—as “‘authentic’ comes in and out of use at certain times” for generations of traders. This namely happens in the production of a tourist Tibet for middle-class Tibetans, Chinese, and other tourists. While most authenticity literature relates to object or place alone, Harris cleverly relates these place-based narratives and intermittent objects’ authenticity to control over geographical imagination, since the revitalization of the object itself is a spatiotemporal action.

In Chapter Three, “Silk Roads and Wool Routes”, the author contends that the economic and political restructuring of intra-Asian networks once “remote” as international tourist destinations and the traders who work through them claim a “revival” to an ancient, authentic past. For example, Harris reveals the almost comic nature of US business newspaper articles depicting her study site, the Nathu-la Pass, as akin to the “Silk Road”, since Nathu-la was, according to her participants, ever at most the “Wool Pass” (page 90) [1]. The possible futures of the Nathu-la have already

drastically altered trade along its routes as shops use Silk Road imagery as a sort of branding, “pointing to lived histories based along a Tibetan trade route that crosscuts and, to some extent, defies state-produced boundaries” (page 96).

The next chapter examines border-crossing practices of traders along the Lhasa–Kathmandu–Kalimpong trade route. “Reopenings and Restrictions” uses Smith’s concept of “scale jumping” as an analytic for “mundane, everyday” trade, contrasting nation-state policies, regional portrayals of “tropes of utopian mobility,” and the actual experiences of those who get to “cross certain borders with certain goods at certain times” (page 105). While the Tibetan border is finally “opened” for some—even reuniting families torn apart for decades—it still fixes: “Traders are for the most part defined as economic actors supporting the nation, not as human beings with exiled cross-border families” (page 111-12). Hard to get and difficult to afford permits and passports, shady kickbacks, shifting regulations, and pricy translators and international and local transport are commonplace. These obstacles reproduce a gendered and classed divisions not only of traders, but also of the values of the commodities themselves. As such, rather than reducing these practices to a discourse of resistance alone, Harris reveals how the harmful and liberatory aspects of trading develop side-by-side.

The author brings us into the debates around “new” Asian trade in the “Chindia” corridor in the “New Economic Geographies” chapter. Here she argues that recent economic growth across India and China have made for both “successful” and “unsuccessful” experiences among “big” and “little” traders. While Tibetan traders are drawn more firmly—if not outright forced—into the infrastructure of ever-expanding Chinese and Indian economic growth, they are also kept on the margins of that trade through (reiterated) linguistic and social limitations. As such Tibetan traders remain a marginalized group economically and politically. Stories of barter, credit, and traditional practices of *phu dung nang tshong* (silent trading inside sleeves) reflect the inequalities of access and possibility afforded in the new networks of capital and investment. The author pays special attention to barter practices, which are often portrayed as “backward” in popular media. However, barter is actually revealed to be necessary in the precarious world of small trading and everyday life.

Well-researched and well-written, Harris’ monograph is a particular standout by an

anthropologist whose work speaks easily and intelligently to the geographical community. I especially recommend this book to scholars of fixity and mobility, as well as to those interested in the geographical imagination. The text will be of great use to those teaching political economies of trade and mobility, especially those keen to interrupt ideas of “the East”. Ever a popular place and/or concept to undergraduates, Chapter Two’s critique of the authenticity of Tibet—while not even mentioning Buddhism—makes for a great course reading. Also, Harris’ ability to admit the failure and success of methods and to show the unfolding of ideas is helpful to those writing first books—a type of book which the geographical community would be kind to point to recent PhD graduates. At the same time—and as with all first monographs—there is a lack of methodological detail that would have been a great help for the reader. An online post or project could easily mend these missing details and make for a great addition to research and teaching.

In her final chapter, Harris asks, “How might this kind of work lead to future steps in the theorizing of more-just globalization processes?” (page 142). It is in response to this question that she pulls out all of the stops and presents us with the crux and synthesis of her work. As a participant shares with her, “We have to get these guys in Delhi to understand what it means to cross a pass. Yaks don’t know borders...” (page 141). The interviewee is discussing both policy makers in India who write policy for large scale traders, and the actual yak animal used by small scale traders to carry cargo over treacherous mountain passes. Even without the drawn mental maps of her participants, Harris pieces together the descriptions of halted landscapes of borders and nations, checkpoints and permits, and passports and kickbacks that speak to the volatile and complicated relations of trade. Yaks may not know borders, but Harris does in all of the ways they are constructed and deconstructed, across and through scales, legalities, and illegalities, on an everyday basis—in all of their geographical diversions.

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## Notes

[1] Compare this to the 2013 interactive feature from *The New York Times*,<sup>[2]</sup> “Riding the New Silk Road,<sup>[3]</sup> showing Hewlett-Packard’s increased and seemingly

unstoppable transport capabilities.

## References

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Katz C 2004 *Growing Up Global: Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

1. [http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/geographical\\_diversions](http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/geographical_diversions)
2. <http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/07/21/silk-road/>
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